

# **The Harriman Institute Forum**

**Volume 4, Number 7  
July 1991**

*Joseph Schull, "Self-Destruction of Soviet Ideology"*



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2023 with funding from  
Columbia University Libraries



# THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FORUM

Volume 4, Number 7

July 1991

## The Self-Destruction of Soviet Ideology

by Joseph Schull

Perestroika and Soviet ideology are both in their death throes today, and little remains but the task of making sense of their demise. Many people would argue that understanding perestroika has little to do with the study of Soviet ideology, because this ideology was already irrelevant when perestroika began.<sup>1</sup> On this view, perestroika meant the final eclipse of ideology as an effective force in Soviet politics. It seems to me that, on the contrary, Soviet ideology has brought the death of perestroika; that is, the refusal of the Gorbachev regime to part with essential elements of official ideology has directly contributed to the failure of its attempt to transform the Soviet polity. Insofar as it is important to understand the causes of perestroika's demise, one must take account of the ideological factor. The point of my discussion here is to explain just how this is so.

In part my remarks will have a retrospective character. I will approach perestroika via a somewhat circuitous path, which leads through some general comments about ideology as a concept, and about its place in what might be called the classic Soviet system of politics, or that which existed prior to 1985. It seems important to do this partly because everyone means something different by ideology, and one must be careful not to be misunder-

stood in using the term. Those who downplay the significance of ideology under perestroika, moreover, in my view also tend to misconstrue the place that ideology had in Soviet politics in the past. Some of my remarks will be general, then, but I shall try to relate this discussion to what has been happening in the Soviet Union over the past few years.

I shall initially contrast two views of ideology; on one view, ideology is characterized as a belief system, while the other sees it as a form of political discourse or language.<sup>2</sup> The first is the more pervasive in Soviet studies, but I think it is the less adequate of the two. When most people have tried to assess whether ideology has — or had — an impact on Soviet political action, they have equated this with the question of whether leaders believe the ideology. Many have supposed there was a time when Soviet leaders were unified by a common belief system which shaped their worldview and directed their actions uniformly. Then, so the argument goes, there came a time when leaders stopped believing the ideology, and it ceased to have any real effect on politics. It was at most a game that people played in order to justify decisions post hoc. But well before Gorbachev dealt it a final blow, Soviet ideology really did not matter much anymore. In

- 1 This view is rather widespread in Soviet studies, but one of its most prominent exponents is Jerry Hough. See Jerry Hough, *The Struggle for the Third World: Soviet Debates and American Options* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1986), p. 7, 11, 261, and passim. See also Jerry Hough, *Russia and the West: Gorbachev and the Politics of Reform* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988). Adam Przeworski has recently made a similar point with respect to all Soviet-type societies. See Adam Przeworski, "The 'East' Becomes the 'South'? The 'Autumn of the People' and the Future of Eastern Europe," *PS - Political Science & Politics* XXIV 1 (March 1991), p. 20.
- 2 For a more extended discussion of these views, see my D.Phil. thesis, "Ideology and the Politics of Soviet Literature under NEP and Perestroika," (Oxford, 1990), esp. Chapter 2. For a broad review of the literature on ideology, see Malcolm B. Hamilton, "The Elements of the Concept of Ideology," *Political Studies* 35 (March 1987), p. 21.



THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027



this sense Gorbachev and perestroika and all the ideological revisions they have brought were only the final culmination of a long period of withering-away of ideology.<sup>3</sup>

This is perhaps something of a caricature, but it does capture the gist of a real perspective on Soviet politics. As I said, I also think this view is wrong, both in its assumptions about what ideology is and about how Soviet ideology relates to politics. In my view it is misleading to see ideology as a belief system and to assume that it affects political action by virtue of the fact that it is believed. A better way is to think of ideology as a political language, which affects action whether or not its adherents believe it. Ideology provides people with a common vocabulary, shared assumptions and arguments, which must be respected in order to be accepted as a speaker of the ideology. This is not to say that ideology cannot influence people's thinking or shape their beliefs, which would be absurd. But the connection between ideology and beliefs is contingent rather than necessary. In this sense ideology should be seen as one of the Soviet system's most important institutions throughout the period up to 1985, one which helps to explain the tremendous stability that the state enjoyed for so long. It was the fact that the political elite was so united about what could be publicly advocated that made for its great staying power, even in the face of a long-term decline in "true belief" in its ideology. Conversely, one of the main reasons for the rapid demise of the Soviet state in the past few years is that this language has come unravelled because of the innovations introduced by the Gorbachev regime, and at the same time one of the main institutions which supported the Soviet political system has crumbled.

Having discussed these two views of ideology and related them to Soviet politics prior to 1985, I will say something about the significance of changes in Soviet political language since then. I will focus on the way in which the concept of pluralism has been integrated into the official Soviet discourse. This is only one of several conceptual innovations in Soviet political language, but it is one of the most important, and the problems which arise in connection with it are also of more general significance for understanding the whole project of ideological revision undertaken since 1985.

One way of seeing the acceptance of pluralism is that it revived the regime's political language by giving it a new realism and openness. This was at least what many observers were saying during the first couple of years of perestroika.<sup>4</sup> I would claim that, on the contrary, this innovation has debilitated official political language and contributed to the regime's destabilization. Today, this is a more common view than it was two or three years ago. In many ways it has become clear that Gorbachev has sawn off the branch he was sitting on without providing himself with an alternative base of support. Yet many would now argue that Gorbachev's position has been weakened because he surrendered Soviet ideology. I would put the point somewhat differently, and argue that he did not jettison the ideology quickly enough, but tried to reform it from within a language that is impervious to reform. The choice for Gorbachev and his allies was either to sustain a basically unreformed ideology, and in this way to retain a solid if conservative political constituency, or to make a decisive break with the old language in search of a new and potentially broader constituency. Instead he has done a bit of both but not enough of either, and has foregone the unity of the regime's old constituency without creating an alternative one. He has tried to insinuate into official ideological discourse a concept that the discourse cannot accommodate, and the failure to make a clear choice between the two has led to the ideology's unravelling from within.

Essentially I am making two points here. The first has to do with the internal dynamics of Soviet political language and the difficulty of introducing pluralism into it without throwing the whole language overboard. The second has to do with the problems which arise when this language meets the world that it is meant to characterize and order. First, political pluralism in Gorbachev's usage has been consistently elaborated in combination with a traditional ideological claim that there is a single set of legitimate interests and values shared by all of Soviet society. Thus, pluralism is a "synthesis of opinions on the basis of which we get nearer to the truth."<sup>5</sup> Instead of admitting a diversity of views just because that is the way

3 For an early statement of this view, see R. Daniels, *The Nature of Communism* (NY:Vintage,1963), p.373. See also Wolfgang Leonhard, *The Kremlin and the West: A Realistic Approach* (NY:Norton,1986), pp.55-59. Some of those who accepted the assumption of growing skepticism among Soviet leaders nevertheless continued to assert a causal influence of ideology on political action; generally they argued that, although there may have been a decline in conscious belief in 'Marxism-Leninism,' it continued to shape the unconscious beliefs of Soviet leaders. The argument in this form was of course even less compelling, for while it was always difficult to judge what Soviet leaders knowingly believed, it was even less clear how one would discover what they believed without knowing it. The claim just hung in mid-air, to be accepted or rejected according to one's prejudices. See Alfred Meyer, *Leninism* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1957), p. 2; Z. Brzezinski, *Ideology and Power in Soviet Politics* (NY: Praeger, 1962), p.5; Z. Brzezinski and S. Huntington, *Political Power: USA/USSR* (NY: Viking,1963), p.40; John A. Armstrong, *Ideology, Politics, and Government in the Soviet Union: An Introduction*, 4th ed., (NY: Praeger,1978), p.27; Donald D.Barry and Carol Barner-Barry, *Contemporary Soviet Politics: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (NJ:Prentice-Hall,1987), p.30.

4 See Archie Brown, "Political Change in the Soviet Union," *World Policy Journal* 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 471-8.

5 M.Gorbachev, "Narashchivat' intellektual'nyi potentsial perestroiki. *Pravda*, 8 January 1989, p.2. The synthesis he had in mind is the 'socialist idea' to which Gorbachev has continued to pledge allegiance. See, for instance, his speech to Moscow Party members published in *Pravda*,



things are, because people just have different values, Gorbachev said that we must have different points of view because this is the best way of coming to a better recognition of the socialist values that we all share. Pluralism is a dialectical step on the way to unity. If one analyzes this inconsistency as an element of Soviet political language, it appears to be more than just the generic opportunism of a good politician, trying to appeal to as many constituencies as possible and rally everyone around him. Of course Gorbachev is doing this, but there is something else going on at a deeper level, where the strategy reflects a basic incoherence within the reformist discourse. Genuine pluralism just has to mean the overthrow of any stipulative assertion of unitary values for society, but Gorbachev has refused to part with the language that imposes this assertion on him. His continuing commitment both to the innovation and to the language in which it is expressed has left him falling between two stools. He has been unable to preserve the ideology because he has introduced the virus of pluralism into it, yet he is also unable to draw authority from the emergence of real pluralism because he insists on facing it into a conceptual framework that it will not and cannot accept.

The second point has to do with what happens when the language reform meets the reality of Soviet politics as it has evolved over the past few years. The natural reply to the foregoing argument is that it devotes too much attention to language and too little to the reality outside of it: certainly there are inconsistencies in Gorbachev's language, but really this does not matter because objectively he has made it possible for real pluralism to emerge. He may continue to talk about how everyone really shares the same values, but in fact he has allowed people to express and organize around their divergent beliefs and values. In a certain sense this is true. Gorbachev's ideological innovations have indeed made it possible for a real pluralism of values to emerge. But this is just the problem. When one looks beyond official political language to the reality outside of it, the problems for Gorbachev only multiply. He has helped to create a reality that his language cannot comprehend, and the more deeply entrenched real pluralism becomes, the more it stands as a rebuttal of the ersatz "socialist pluralism" that was officially on offer. That he may now have belatedly recon-

ciled himself to real pluralism is irrelevant, because it has come into being despite his efforts to the contrary. A couple of years go he would have been able to draw credit for endorsing real pluralism and agreeing to preside over it. Now, he only looks weak in accepting a reality over which he has no control in any case.<sup>6</sup>

Hopefully, that will have made it clear where I am headed in what follows. I will not spend a great deal of time explaining why it is better to study ideology as a language than as a belief system. What I hope is that by setting out the way in which each makes one perceive Soviet politics, the greater plausibility of the second view will suggest itself. Describing Soviet ideology as a system of beliefs makes its effect very straightforward: ideology creates beliefs that in turn lead to a certain pattern of action, barring countervailing beliefs of circumstances. This also makes the power of ideology vary with the strength of an individual's belief in it. At one end of the continuum is the true believer, whose actions flow directly from his convictions. At the other end is the cynic, for whom ideology is insignificant as anything but a "smokescreen" for action. Usually, Sovietologists given to this view hark back to a golden age in Soviet history, when the leadership was united around a common worldview which motivated them all in pretty much the same way. At some point, it is argued, cracks started appearing in this monolith, as people lost faith in this or that part of the ideology, or simply lost faith altogether. Instead of a group of true believers, there were now a growing number of cynics who merely used ideology manipulatively. Or, a variety of factions emerged, who all believed different things but certainly did not share a common belief system. They just used ideology to soft-soap their "real" group interests. In either case, the natural conclusion was that ideology as a coherent body of ideas was no longer of much significance in explaining Soviet political action. In tandem with the process of intellectual disenchantment or fragmentation, ideology became marginalized as a factor in Soviet politics. Ideology was described by one observer as a "dead language," because it no longer rested on a foundation of genuine faith.<sup>7</sup> The interpretation of perestroika as a final parting of the ways with Marxist-Leninist ideology derives from this view.

14 May 1990, p.1

6 The decision in the winter of 1990 at the Third Congress of People's Deputies to establish the constitutional basis for a multi-party system may be seen as the marker of an official acceptance of genuine pluralism. Gorbachev's speech to the Central Committee plenum prior to the Congress called on the Party to play its vanguard role without its imposition by 'constitutional legislation.' *Pravda*, 6 February 1990, p.1. Gorbachev later characterized this as a return to the Party's 'natural, original role as conceived by Lenin.' *Pravda*, 28 April 1990, pp.1-2. His conduct in the period leading up to this concession was characteristically ambivalent. In February 1989, speaking to a group of industrial workers, Gorbachev characterized talk of a multi-party system as 'rubbish.' Central Television, 15 February 1989. As late as December 1989, at the Second Congress of People's Deputies, Gorbachev intervened decisively to defeat a move by radical deputies to have a debate on Article Six of the Soviet constitution included on the agenda.

7 See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 3: *The Breakdown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.529.



Gorbachev and his allies had resolved to bury a language that had been dead for years.

If one instead thinks of ideology as a political language with only a contingent connection to beliefs and belief systems, matters look quite different both before and after 1985. Ideology, understood as a discourse, affects political action insofar as an adherent must conform to its conventions.<sup>8</sup> This need not entail a belief in the conventions' veracity. The required attitude is respect, not faith. Ideology provides a medium for political debate, and its conventions shape the kind of arguments that can be legitimated. In the Soviet system prior to 1985, it was perhaps the main resource for political debate, but it was a special kind of resource, which had the power to affect the use that could be made of it.

I should briefly clarify the two main concepts I am employing here, 'convention' and 'legitimation'. Conventions make up the substance of an ideology: its vocabulary, terms and concepts, figures of speech, criteria of coherence and verification, and so on. Analyses of Soviet ideology very frequently get bogged down in a debate over whether or not the ideology is Marxism-Leninism, or some combination of Marxism-Leninism and Russian nationalism, or something else again.<sup>9</sup> I will not enter into this debate here, because it seems largely sterile. If one views Soviet ideology as the official language of its political elite, then one merely needs to analyze the discourse, look for its patterns, and not worry about adding a label to it. In my view, some conventions of Soviet political language are indeed derived from 'Marxism-Leninism', while others come from Russian nationalism and yet others from the experience of Soviet history. Saying anything more than this seems to be unnecessary: just listen to what is said by Soviet politicians, and try to make sense of it, and this will be a study of "Soviet ideology."

Conventions begin with the basic vocabulary of terms and concepts that are used in debate — proletariat, bourgeoisie, class struggle, the Party, and so on. Key terms such as these are simultaneously descriptive and evaluative — they evaluate something in describing it. In the classic Soviet political language, it was impossible to speak of a class struggle between the proletariat and the

bourgeoisie without also identifying one's loyalties with the proletariat. Similarly, it was impossible to describe some policy as that of the Party without also implying that this policy was correct and unimpeachable. To do otherwise would have implied that the speaker had misunderstood the terms being used. This is one kind of convention, having to do with the basic vocabulary of the language. Another, more important kind of convention has to do with the basic propositions — indeed, I am not certain such an exercise is possible — but I will mention several which seem to be cornerstones of the traditional discourse. One is the claim that there is a correct, scientific view of the social world, and that Marxism-Leninism is it. Another is the claim that this view is embodied in the Communist Party, which thereby earns the leading role in society's organization and development. Both of these conventions are implicitly echoed by Gorbachev in his claim that there is a unitary set of legitimate values for all of society. He basically reiterates the claim that there is a correct way of viewing the world, and that this is provided by official ideology. A third convention is the notion of party-mindedness, which follows from the first two. Democratic centralism is another convention, with its imperative that decisions of higher party bodies are binding on lower ones. Another is the commitment to dynamic order, which encompasses both rapid economic development and a view that this development must be organized by the Party. A final convention is that of state ownership of the means of production and central planning of the economy.

These were for a very long time the building blocks of political debate among the Soviet elite. Regardless of whether or not someone believed the propositions to be valid, they had to endorse the conventions publicly and shape their arguments accordingly. This could not, moreover, be a matter of merely saying one thing and doing another, as the description of ideology as a "smokescreen" implies. The act itself had to conform to its description if those to whom it was being legitimated were to take it seriously as an act of the described kind. In other words, if you want to be a credible practitioner of your ideology, you really must do what you say.<sup>10</sup>

8 The concept of conventions employed here is drawn from the work of Quentin Skinner. For a selection of Skinner's methodological articles and critical appraisals of his work, see James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). See also David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1969.)

9 This was the subject of a lively debate in the journal *Soviet Studies* in the late sixties. For a review of the original debate, see Stephen White, "Ideology and Soviet Politics," in *Ideology and Soviet Politics*, ed. Stephen White and Alex Pravda (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988), p.5. Its outcome was rather inconclusive, however, as most remained wedded to their own particular view on the relation between Soviet ideology and Marxism-Leninism. Thereafter, attention began to shift towards the study of "political culture," which to many appeared to offer a broader and less contentious approach to the relationship between ideas and Soviet political action. For a recent discussion of the content of Soviet ideology, see Michael Waller, "What is to Count as Ideology in Soviet Politics?" in White & Pravda, *Ideology and Soviet Politics*, pp.21-42.

10 Skinner puts the point as follows: "thus the problem facing an agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time a gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the



When I use the term 'legitimation', I am referring to the Soviet political elite, because in my view ideology was the language of the elite. It was always a commonplace of Soviet studies that the Communist Party 'legitimated' its rule to the Soviet people by reference to its ideology. And yet it would be stretching things to say that the Party always kept its word in this relationship. The confusion arises because two different senses of the word 'legitimation' are being used, and they are incompatible. When one claimed that Soviet ideology was used to legitimate the rule of the Communist Party to the Soviet people, one usually meant that it was an exercise in salesmanship or public relations.<sup>11</sup> But this is a misuse of the concept of legitimation. It assumes that the Communist Party saw the Soviet people as the source of its legitimacy, and this assumption is just wrong. According to the classic ideology, the Communist Party derived its right to rule from History, not from the variable opinions of the Soviet people. Of course, the regime wanted to popularize its policies in the interests of stability, but public relations is not legitimation and stability is not legitimacy. When I use the term, I mean it in the Weberian sense, and I do not have in mind the relationship between the Party and society at large. I am thinking of the political elites' internal dialogue amongst themselves. Political elites in the classic Soviet system legitimated their actions to each other, not to the Soviet people. It was in this context that ideology enjoyed a significant power to shape action, because only elites were able to constrain each other to act in obedience to ideological conventions. Insofar as ideology is concerned, the Soviet political elite and the Soviet people were not part of the same speech community.

Ideological conventions also shaped the way in which innovations and corresponding changes in policy could be argued for. Individual leaders still expect to be taken seriously by their colleagues. Innovations had to be made by invoking other conventions that were held fixed: if you wanted to modify the script, you had to rehearse many well-known lines. If, for instance, someone wanted to question the practice of central planning, he could not just say that it was wrong without further elaboration, and expect this argument to have any force. What he might have said was that central planning, while itself correct, was being inefficiently applied. In this case the convention is not really being questioned at all; it is modified but

not rejected. A more overtly revisionist move, which has been seen more often since 1985, is to attack central planning directly by claiming that the value placed on it is mistaken. But it is doubtful that someone could just attack the practice. More likely, he would claim that planning has begun to obstruct another ideological commitment that is taken to be more central, that of economic growth. The argument might be that planning was devised as a means to the rational development of society's economic resources, but it has now begun to inhibit that end. The argument leans on one convention — the commitment to economic growth and prosperity — to modify or reject another, planning; it proposes a better way of seeing the world from a perspective that is recognizably the same.

Other examples of this kind of debate around ideological conventions could be given, but the point should be clear. A member of an ideological group like the Soviet political elite cannot say just anything, advance any claim or criticism of official policy, and expect to get a hearing. Yet many observers would claim that since 1985 this has no longer been the case — today, anything goes. In a superficial sense this does appear to be true. Compared with the policy debates of Brezhnev era, it is obvious that a dramatic change has occurred. Then, it was almost impossible to attack any of the above-mentioned conventions directly. Today, not one of the conventions remains intact. But if one considers the way in which the Gorbachev regime has introduced its innovations, the point still applies. The reform is still an internal one, legitimating the new by making it compatible with the old.

For instance, it was possible for Gorbachev to embrace pluralism only by rendering it compatible with at least some of the old ideology's conventions. Since the twenties it had been claimed that there was a unitary set of legitimate values for society, and these were represented by Communist Party ideology. Formerly, they were described as proletarian values, today they are described as all-human — but in both cases they are embodied in the Party's ideology. For this reason, it was impossible within the official political language to say squarely that a variety of views exist in society and all are valid. And Gorbachev did not want to break with this language, so he did something else. He claimed that pluralism was really a way of getting clear about what society's common values are. Everyone fundamentally wanted the

problem of tailoring his projects to fit the viable normative language." Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1978), 1: xii-xiii.

11 "[Ideology] is to convince the citizenry that the Party and its rulers have a legitimate claim to rule them. More broadly, it is to convince the people that the entire system of government is legitimate. Ideology is thus an exercise in salesmanship or public relations. It seeks to persuade the Soviet citizens that theirs is the best of all possible societies." Alfred Meyer, "The Functions of Ideology in the Soviet Political System," *Soviet Studies* 17 (January 1966), p.279.



same things, but sometimes it was difficult to see how this translated into a policy, as a maximum of openness was necessary to achieve clarity about common ends. In the end, everyone would come to agreement about the way forward. Thus, Gorbachev legitimated this innovation by making it recognizable within the terms of the old ideology. There was still a change, and an important one, but it was a change form within the ideology, which allowed him to insist that the whole language was not being thrown overboard. Pluralism was offered as an innovation which served an orthodox goal.

At the same time, Gorbachev continuously described ongoing conflicts of opinion as manifestations of groupish self-interest or ambition.<sup>12</sup> This is merely a consequence of his definition of pluralism. Given the common values and interests shared by everyone, persistent conflicts cannot be based on principle — they can only be battles for position and privilege. Once the various views have been exchanged and considered in a spirit of tolerance and openness, agreement must result among all people of sound mind and good will.<sup>13</sup> Those who continue to behave disagreeably must have an ulterior motive, some unprincipled scheme in mind. Pluralism thus amounts to a means of consolidating society around a common project. The way Gorbachev describes the relationship between pluralism and consolidation is very telling. In a meeting with representatives of the media in the fall of 1988, he said:

When you regularly follow the papers and journals, you get the impression that certain authors and even organizations have already distributed themselves, into certain papers and journals. Today I can tell you exactly which letters this journal will publish and which ones that will. Group passions are appearing. And we must overcome this. Publish everything. There must be a pluralism of opinion. But with such an orientation that the line of perestroika, the interests of socialism are defended and strengthened.<sup>14</sup>

It is characteristic that Gorbachev speaks of group passions rather than values; people are getting over-wrought, letting their emotions blind them to their true interests. In a Western context, it would be strange to propose that

journals occupying certain positions on the political spectrum have an obligation to publish more of the other side's views — the reason they exist is to publish their own. Pluralism usually means that people must tolerate a diversity of values because their synthesis is impossible. It has often been noted that the Soviet use of pluralism is an eccentric and instrumental one, as the regime used openness to foster popular support for its reforms, and accepted openness only insofar as it supported these reforms.<sup>15</sup> This is indeed one of the ideological dilemmas of Soviet-style pluralism — a to-and-fro in tolerance which tends to discredit the regime in the eyes of its people. But this inconsistency in policy is only part of the ideological dilemma, and it seems to have become less important with time. Objectively, Gorbachev's version of pluralism has contributed to the expression of a great diversity of views, many of them opposed to elements of the state's reforms. In practice, Soviet-style pluralism has led to something more and more approaching real pluralism. But for the reform Communists there remains the problem of making sense of this development. They have introduced a formula which legitimates the freer expression of divergent views, yet found themselves unable to endorse their real, that is to say, divisive, effects. Gorbachev has helped to create a reality that he can neither accept nor comprehend because of the language he must use to characterize it. As this reality is consolidated, Gorbachev's description of it becomes a lie which discredits him. Conversely, it seems that a failure to limit 'diversity that divides' is just as costly to the regime's authority. This is because its initial assurances that pluralism would unite people were proven false, while the concurrent failure to carry out the implicit threat to intervene in the interest of unity only widens the gap between promises and deeds. The official discourse of pluralism is shown to be both false and powerless.

There is also another aspect to this problem; beyond Gorbachev's failure to predict what the result of Soviet-style pluralism would be, he also deepened the divide between language and reality by forcing his own ideological categories onto what did emerge. Repeatedly he has complained about "groupishness" and sectional inter-

12 This tendency is especially rampant in Gorbachev's discussions of popular front and independence movements, which are almost invariably attacked as corrupt and self-serving, and are frequently identified with the interests of the second economy. Hence, "democracy, perestroika arouse stormy changes in all regions of the country, and threaten the interests of the black market... nobody raises the flag of defense of corruption, but one can speculate with the flag of defense of national interests." *Izvestia*, 12 April, 1990, p. 1. For the Soviet president, "all kinds of separatists, chauvinists, and nationalists... are hastening to take advantage of the growth in national self-awareness of peoples for their own selfish ends. The intent is obvious: to deal a preventive strike to restructuring, which threatens to thwart their far-reaching schemes." *Pravda*, 6 February, 1990, p. 1.

13 Gorbachev tends to use the term 'healthy elements' to characterize the parties to this consensus, as in his defense of the proposed new Party Program's capacity to 'consolidate all healthy elements' at the Central Committee Plenum in February 1990, p. 1.

14 M. Gorbachev, "Na perelomnom etape perestroiki," *Pravda*, 25 September 1988, p. 2.

15 James Scanlan has drawn attention to the Soviet regime's instrumental conception of glasnost, which is meant to assure the success of transformations in the economic sphere. See J. Scanlan, "Reforms and Civil Society in the U.S.S.R.," in *Problems of Communism* (March-April 1988), pp. 41-6.



ests as though they are a distortion of pluralism. Popular Fronts are described as narrow extremists who have hijacked innocent people behind a project which is against their interest. Much the same is said of opposition movements in Russia. The main charge against Boris Yeltsin, repeated ad infinitum, is that his conflict with Gorbachev reflects an overweening personal ambition. Gorbachev has been very slow to recognize publicly that what exist outside the walls of the Kremlin are not groups of extremists consumed by a desire for power, but people with values different to his own, and a very natural outcome of the process he set underway. For several years he has consistently questioned the dignity of opposition to official policy by characterizing it as based upon petty motivations. In the end, he has alienated everyone: conservatives who were dragged along the path of reforms suddenly discover that he has made a wrong turn toward revolution, while those who would like to carry out a real revolution find Gorbachev blocking their way as he searches vainly for the road to reform Communism.

Gorbachev is of course not the only member of the political elite to have advocated pluralism, and the intention here is not to reduce the ideological innovations of the past few years to his role alone.<sup>16</sup>

I have concentrated on Gorbachev because his view seems to represent the main trend of Soviet ideological reform-from-above. It is not an acceptance of pluralism, but pluralism in one ideology, and this notion is nonsensical. Opening society to a diversity of views must lead to ideological pluralism; or else the process has to be halted and society kept closed. In either case something has to give. It is in this sense unsurprising that, along with the partial crackdown on independence movements and political activism overseen by Gorbachev recently, official discussions of political pluralism have become rather more defensive and measured. Here again, though, Gorbachev's hesitations and procrastination have left him in the worst kind of halfway house: a fledgling civil society is irretrievably alienated from him and determined to resist attempts to undermine it, but remains too weakly implanted to overwhelm the defenders of unitarian orthodoxy decisively.

I have focused mainly on the official version of pluralism and its internal contradictions. Taken on its own and considered in a vacuum, the strategy seems incoherent.

It combines commitments that are basically incompatible. But once society is brought into the picture, the problems only multiply, because the language of reform has also been appropriated quite broadly and spontaneously by popular voices, in order to pursue a dialogue with the state and within civil society itself. Even people hostile to the regime often have accepted official terms for the expression of their own more radical demands.<sup>17</sup>

This is perhaps a sign of the primitiveness of the Soviet public space at the beginning of perestroika, when society lacked even an elementary language with which to formulate popular demands, and therefore readily accepted the terms provided by the regime. With the progress of reform and the maturing of this public space, there have been attempts to stretch the meaning of new ideological terms beyond the limits originally envisaged for them, and thereby to use the regime's own language to push it further than it wanted to go. For instance, the official policy of "self-financing" — originally introduced as a policy of limited enterprise autonomy — was subsequently used to legitimate the economic autonomy demanded by many Soviet republics. They stretched its meaning to work it in their favour. As for the concept of pluralism, Gorbachev's efforts to keep it within ideologically acceptable boundaries have failed dramatically, as groups outside the regime exploited the acceptance of pluralism to argue for the legitimacy of a multi-party system.

The regime's reform language is thus a double-edged sword not just because of internal paradoxes but also because it can be turned against its author by popular voices. The possibility of this manipulation of the official vocabulary depends in part on the leadership's inability to decide on the meaning of its own reforms; it has lost control of the discourse because in many cases, especially economic policy, it has been slow to set the agenda. But the discourse itself is also supposed to be dialogical, that is society is expected to participate in settling its meaning. The real point is that revising ideology in the old fashioned way, through general secretaries' speeches at Party Congresses and November revolutionary celebrations, matters less and less. The reason is that the Soviet political community is no longer the closed club that it used to be. For a very long time the Soviet language of politics was a kind of specialized dialect, relevant only to

16 Prior to his retirement from the Politburo last year, Alexander Yakovlev offered a redefinition of unity and socialism remarkably free of dogma: "What should there be unity about? In our understanding that we want to live freely in a democratic and humane society. Let us argue about the rest." And further: "maybe we should approach the issue in this way — something is socialist which is good for a person, which is useful, gives him wealth, happiness, raises his dignity." A. Yakovlev, "Sotsializm: ot mehti k real'nosti," *Kommunist* 4 (March 1990): pp. 16, 20.

17 For instance, Lithuania's Sajudis adopted the name of 'Popular Front in Support of Perestroika' on its formation, providing an acceptable umbrella under which its more radical demands could gradually be formulated. Gorbachev recognized this dilemma for the official reformist discourse during his visit to Lithuania in the winter of 1990, when he claimed that speakers at the recent Sajudis Sejm had said "we should say that we support Gorbachev's line, then implement our own." *Pravda*, 13 January, 1990, p. 3.



those who participated in public debate. Whatever its other defects, there was a kind of fit between this language and the elite's form of life. For them, the Communist party really did have the leading role in society, whether or not it was playing this role adequately. One of the most important changes in the past few years has been the dissolution of this closed order and the formation of a much broader and popular space. This change in the context of political language is very important for understanding the import of changes in it. If one interprets the Gorbachev innovations as one would have done in Brezhnev era, one sees only a very impressive set of doctrinal revisions established by official fiat. But viewed against the background disintegration of the institutions of Soviet power and the formation of a new public space taking place concurrently, it becomes evident that the underpinnings of Soviet ideology are rapidly disappearing; there is no longer a fit between the official discourse and the world it is meant to characterize. The opening of ideology to a community outside the elite only hastens this disintegration and further weakens the discourse. If one views the innovations from this perspective, they appear self-destructive rather than progressive; they are significant not as a liberalization of Soviet ideology but as a catalyst of its collapse. While ideology has indeed changed rapidly, political life has changed even more dramatically and detached itself from the linguistic and conceptual boundaries within which the regime would like to contain it. Thus, the problem is not only that the ideological reforms do not make sense on their own terms. It is also that the regime's political language simply does not fit the reality it is supposed to characterize.

It may seem to some that I have set an irrelevant standard of evaluation for Gorbachev and the Soviet reformers, and not taken sufficient account of what is was possible for them to do. I have not mentioned the conservative forces who supposedly might have unseated the reformers had they attempted to make a more radical break with the traditional ideology. I have some reservations about this view, because I think that to explain why Gorbachev has not moved more quickly one must point a finger at him, and remember that he and his allies are still establishment liberals. But this is partly a matter of speculation, and it is only in retrospect that we will know more clearly what has been in Gorbachev's mind during the

past six years. But the main argument here has little to do with Gorbachev's private thoughts, and concerns the very possibility of internal reform in the sphere of Soviet ideology. A great many people today, both in the Soviet Union and in eastern and central Europe, are agreed that economic transformation cannot come in measured steps. In the Soviet Union, the saying is that "one cannot leap across a chasm in two bounds." I have been suggesting that the same principle applies to ideology. I do not think it was possible to transform this ideology from within. When one legitimates pluralism in the terms of an ideology that is essentially alien to it, one creates an intolerable confusion and undermines both the innovation and the ideology. At some point it would have been necessary for Gorbachev to make a clear statement that legitimacy in the Soviet state derives from a democratic political process over which he would preside without forcing it into pre-ordained categories. And this would have to have been associated with a certain strategy of action, most importantly that of distancing himself from the Communist Party. Some will again think it unrealistic to expect this of Gorbachev. But if one considers the predicament his more conservative course has created, it seems that taking such a gamble earlier would in the long term have steadied this position by making its appeal more ecumenical. Perhaps Gorbachev could have made the more radical leap earlier, when he still had some momentum and the initiative belonged to him. Then, making a clear break with Soviet ideology would have been seen by many people as an act of vision. His belated acceptance of a multi-party politics in 1990 came too late to shore up his position. It was seen as an act of desperation which only confirmed his growing irrelevance. Gorbachev persisted in delaying his leap across the chasm separating ideological orthodoxy from political reality even as it steadily widened; today, with his stamina evidently diminished and the distance more daunting than ever, it is too late to expect such heroics from him.

---

*Joseph Schull is currently Oxford University lecturer in Soviet politics and a fellow of St. Anthony's College. This article is based on a seminar given at St. Antony's College in November 1990. The author wishes to thank the participants of the seminar and in particular its host, Dr. Alex Pravda, for their helpful comments.*

**Note:**

Due to a production error, the first 2 lines of p.2 of the June 1991 Forum were omitted. The corrected paragraph should read:  
 "1. the uneven progress toward institutionalization of human rights, 1988-1990 bringing semi-democracy, semi-legalization of freedom, and first steps toward rule of law."

Our apologies to our readers and to the author, Peter Juviler.







Columbia University  
Harriman Institute  
420 W 118th Street  
New York NY 10027

Non Profit Org  
US Postage  
PAID  
New York NY  
Permit #3593

forthcoming in the *Forum*  
double issue August-September 1991

**\*\* The Second Summer  
Intermezzo \*\***

*The Harriman Institute Forum* is published monthly by  
The W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union, Columbia University.

Editor: Leslie Auerbach

Assistant Editor: Misha Ratner

Copyright ©1991 by the Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York

All Rights Reserved. Reproduction of any kind without written permission is strictly prohibited

The *Forum* is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York

ISSN Number: 0896-114X

Subscription information: US/Canada: 1yr/\$30; 2yr/\$50. Elsewhere: 1yr/\$40; 2yr/\$75

Make check or money order payable to Columbia University and send to *Forum*, Harriman Institute, 420 W 118th Street,  
New York NY 10027

Selected back issues available at \$3 apiece